

Healthway's position on Alcohol

Alcohol and Health

Alcohol is one of the most widely used mood-altering, recreational drugs in Australia. In 2007 one in ten adults consumed alcohol at levels considered to be harmful in the long term (more than 4 standard drinks for men and more than 2 standard drinks for women), and one in five consumed alcohol at least monthly at levels considered to be harmful in the short term (more than 6 standard drinks per occasion for males and more than 4 standard drinks per occasion for females).¹ New national alcohol guidelines published in 2009 introduced the concept of a progressively increasing risk with the amount consumed and recommended that both men and women should consume no more than two standard drinks on any day in order to reduce the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.²

Between 1991-2 and 2000-01, Western Australia was the only state in Australia to show an overall increase in per capita alcohol consumption.³ WA also had the second highest consumption at levels associated with short and long-term harm in 2001, with 24% and 11% of the population aged 14 years and over drinking above low risk levels at least once a month, respectively, compared with 20.5% and 9.9% nationally.³

Globally, alcohol accounts for 3.2% of deaths (1.8 million annually) and 4.0% (58.3 million) of Disability Adjusted Life Years.⁴ Alcohol is implicated in more than 60 types of disease and injury, including a number of cancers, cirrhosis of the liver, homicide, epileptic seizures and motor vehicle accidents.⁴

Alcohol is also associated with social problems such as crime, assaults, road trauma, domestic violence, family disruption and property damage. The costs of alcohol to Australian society were estimated to be more than \$15 million in 2004/05.⁵ These costs do not just impact on the individual drinker – family members and the broader community are impacted by another's drinking problems. In 2001, alcohol was implicated in 65,000 hospital admissions in Australia.⁶ In WA, 46,744 hospitalisations and 2,125 deaths between 2000 and 2004 were due to alcohol consumption.⁷

Groups most at risk

Although there has been a decline over the past 20 years in per capita alcohol consumption in Australia, it remains high by world standards.⁸ Alcohol

consumption among young people is a particular concern as rates of drinking at harmful levels by 12 to 17 year olds have doubled in the past two decades.⁹ A 2002 survey of WA students aged 12 to 17 years found that 33% had consumed alcohol in the previous week. Of these, 25% of females and 22% of males drank at levels considered harmful in the short term.¹⁰ In 2008, in response to increasingly hazardous consumption patterns, particularly among young people, the Australian Government announced a National Binge Drinking Strategy to support a range of local programs designed to address the issue.¹¹

While women are more susceptible to the physiological effects of alcohol consumption,² males are more likely to drink, commence drinking at an earlier age,¹ consume larger quantities and engage in hazardous behaviour as a result.² In Australia, alcohol-related deaths are three times higher in men than women (1,603 and 523 respectively), while alcohol-related hospitalisations are twice as high (29,092 and 17,652 respectively).⁵

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy may harm the health of the baby. Consuming more than one drink per day has been associated with miscarriage, low birth weight, cognitive defects and congenital abnormalities.¹² The prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome in WA is recorded as 0.02 per 1000 for non-Aboriginal children and 2.75 per 1000 for Aboriginal children.¹³ The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health found that while pregnant women aged 18-23 years were more likely to abstain from drinking or rarely drink, 3% reported drinking alcohol at risky levels.¹³

Indigenous Australians are more likely to abstain from alcohol consumption than non-Indigenous people (23.4% vs 16.8%), but those who do drink are more likely to consume alcohol at levels that increase their risk of short term harm (27.4% vs 20.1%).¹ Between 2000 and 2004, Indigenous people in WA accounted for 20% of alcohol-related hospitalisations and 9% of alcohol-related deaths, despite comprising less than 3% of the general population.^{7,14} Studies have also shown that alcohol-related death and

hospitalisation in WA is higher in non-metropolitan than metropolitan areas.¹⁵

Contributing Factors

Alcohol use is influenced by a range of individual, social and environmental factors. Body size, tolerance and previous drinking experience are among individual factors known to influence alcohol consumption and intoxication.¹⁶ A study of aggression and harm in licensed venues highlighted the contribution of environmental factors such as overcrowding, a predominance of young males, loud music, little provision of food, cheap drinks, confrontational staff, and low standards of furnishing and upkeep.¹⁶ Social determinants of health that have been shown to impact on alcohol problems include:

- The positive cultural entrenchment of alcohol in Australian society;
- Lack of individual support;
- Stigma associated with accessing help in relation to alcohol use;
- Low resilience;
- Availability of alcohol (including price, opening hours, number of outlets, serving practices);
- Social norms and values relating to the acceptability of drinking to excess;
- Opportunities for education and employment;
- Disposable income;
- Cultural and parental norms relating to adolescent alcohol use;
- Boredom; and
- Culture/ethnicity^{14,17}

Healthway's Position

Healthway has identified reducing harm from alcohol as a new high priority in its Strategic Plan for 2008-2011. Healthway will contribute to creating a culture where high levels of alcohol consumption are socially unacceptable, creating environments where alcohol is only consumed within recommended safe limits and improving the evidence for effective alcohol control strategies.¹⁸ Healthway supports the five key strategic directions within the Western Australian Alcohol Plan 2006-2009.¹⁵ These outline proven, effective measures that reduce alcohol-related problems and are relevant to all at-risk groups:

1. Helping young people avoid high-risk alcohol consumption;
2. Community action to support responses to alcohol-related problems;
3. Responsible supply and service of alcohol;
4. Enhancing access to treatment and support for people affected by alcohol related problems; and
5. Information, monitoring and evaluation¹⁵

In particular, Healthway supports:

- Initiatives and policies that inform organisers and hosts of their rights and obligations when providing alcohol to guests or patrons, and support safer communities with regard to alcohol-related problems.
- Creating supportive environments through policies that promote safer drinking environments.
- Measures to control the promotion and advertising of alcohol.

Healthway will:

- Support initiatives to increase understanding about the recommended safe alcohol limits and the potential dangers of exceeding the limits
- Extend the reach of campaigns and programs to reduce community tolerance of drunkenness and associated behaviours and increase support for policy initiatives to reduce alcohol-related harm.
- Support advocacy for controls, regulations and policies to encourage responsible promotion and service of alcohol and discourage consumption at unsafe levels.
- Support the development and implementation of culturally appropriate alcohol programs and interventions aimed at responsible alcohol service, and marketing for Aboriginal people in partnership with local Aboriginal communities and agencies.
- Work with funded and sponsored groups, and other stakeholders to implement and monitor safe alcohol consumption policies and practices in all licensed venues under their control.
- Invest in building the evidence base for effective interventions and approaches to promoting safe alcohol consumption and preventing harm associated with excessive use, particularly among priority population groups.
- Ensure all organisations receiving \$20,000 or more from Healthway develop and implement policies on the responsible service and promotion of alcohol, where applicable
- Avoid sponsoring events and activities that could position Healthway's name or health messages alongside those of companies selling or promoting alcohol beverages
- Promote the *Rethink Drink* alcohol message in conjunction with targeted sports, arts and racing sponsorships.

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